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School Counselors Linked to Student Success

by Jaymes Pyne

Content is the crucial point of attending school. But if students are not addressing issues in their personal life, how can we begin to expect them to sit down and learn for seven hours a day?

Because of the realities of today's schools, students need an advocate that will address their various needs. Social workers are effective support staff members, but deal mostly with at-risk students, and students do not need to be at-risk to have personal issues that need resolving. Teachers are feeling the heat from high-stakes testing and content standards, and although they act as advocates, they can't realistically resolve all students' issues alone. School counselors are in the position to advocate for all students.

School counselors are in the unique position of addressing the personal and social issues of students, and connecting that with academic achievement and planning for the future. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recommends a counseling program that works with teachers, administrators, support staff, parents, and the community to foster healthy, safe, and educational school environments for students.

Research indicates that students with access to inclusive and fully-implemented counseling
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programs feel better about going to school, are more likely to enroll in higher-level courses, and on average will perform better on the ACT test. Such programs also positively affect academic achievement and school safety. Counselors may address such issues as bullying, depression, study skills, dating relationships, career planning, ACT preparation, and substance abuse. This may be done one-on-one, in small groups, or at an assembly. Counselors also teach in the classroom and work with teachers to integrate critical issues into course content.

But even given all of the above reasons, the benefits of school counseling programs in Michigan have not been fully recognized by the state. There is no mandate for districts to employ school counselors, so even having a program is optional.

In Michigan there are 648 students for every school counselor. Compared to other states, that's high—and 2.6 times higher than the ASCA recommended ratio of 250:1. Nationally, lower ratios correlate with higher achievement rates.

In the Midwest, for example, Illinois and Michigan have the highest student to counselor ratios (685:1 and 648:1, respectively), and also perform the worst on

NAEP math and reading tests, compared to Wisconsin and Ohio who have the lowest ratios (461:1 and 500:1) and also the highest achievement rates on the same tests.

School counseling programs are vital in the developmental growth of all students. Claudia Sowa Wojciakowski, current President of the Michigan School Counselor Association (MSCA) and Grand Valley State University professor, along with MSCA lobbyist David Ladd, are spearheading the issue legally, and are currently working on a white paper that will address this issue to legislators in the coming year.

The white paper refers to national trends as well as ratio comparisons both in-state and nationwide. This writer and Paul Mannes of the Community Outreach Office at GVSU's College of Education, working with MSCA, gathered the information used in the white paper and in this article. The white paper was approved by the MSCA board and endorsed by the Association of Michigan School Counselors. ♡

For more information on school counseling or to view a copy of the white paper, visit <http://www.mich-sca.org/> or call (616) 365-0322.